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ABSTRACT

For decades women have aspired to leadership positions in business, industry, and education. How women perceive opportunities in education, as well as their perceptions of viable options in meeting their career objectives, are important issues to address in college preparation courses. Sixty-one female students currently enrolled in administrative programs in both public and private education sectors in Northwest Georgia were surveyed for an initial study to determine their demographic characteristics and attitudes. Twenty-eight questions include demographic information as well as beliefs and attitudes of students regarding administrative possibilities. One open-ended question asked for skills the students' believed they needed to succeed in a predominantly male environment. A second question asked for additional characteristics students need or want to know about women administrators. Results of this study are reported as nominal statistics. Percentages are reported in selected variables. An analysis of variance (ANOVA) run on the variables shows no real significance at the .05 level between or among the 28 variables. Among descriptive results are that the majority of female students enrolled in administrative programs are currently elementary teachers between the ages of 36-45, that these students have a preference for democratic and situational leadership, and that it is difficult for women in administration to advance beyond a certain level. (Contains 16 references.) (RR)

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# A Study of Women's Perceptions of Administrative Opportunities In The Advent of the 21st Century

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For decades, women have aspired to leadership positions in business, industry and in education. During the next five years, administrators at all levels, elementary through high school, will replace those who are retiring and those who are opening new schools. As we prepare for the 21st century, the percentage of women enrolled in, and graduating from administrative degree programs continues to increase. Women outnumber men in administration courses often by three to one. A review of literature produces an abundance of studies on women in administration that includes leadership styles, general characteristics, mentoring and new paradigms for women. Research pertaining to female students in administration classes and their responses to questions concerning how they perceive their chances of attaining an administrative position is virtually non-existent, yet such studies would assist institutions in preparing future administrators.

How women perceive opportunities in education and the presence of a glass ceiling,as well as their perceptions of viable options in meeting their career objectives, are important issues to iaddress in college preparation courses. Some questions regarding these issues include:

1. Why do women enroll in administrative programs?
2. Are there perceived differences among women of different ethnic cultures and/or demographic settings regarding educational goals and other selected variables?
3. How seriously do women consider mentoring and networking for career advancement?
4. How do women view educational advancement possibilities when compared to private business?

Although there has been a slight increase of women as school administrators, fewer than 22 percent of the women seeking advancement will receive educational administrative positions (Schmuck and Schubert 1986). The "glass ceiling" is alive and well in education as historic trends continue to show that males dominate principalships, especially at the high school level

(American Association of School Principals, 1985; Shakeshaft, 1987; Schmuck, 1987; Greyvenstein & Van Der Westhuizen, 1991). Gotwalt and Towns (1989) found that women held 2 percent of the high school principalships; down 5 percent since a 1982 study by the American Association of School Administrators. Marshall and Mitchell (1989) indicate that there are no real increases in the numbers of women obtaining principalships. There are several reason for this drop in percentages. Women are becoming more diversified. They find other positions in iindustry, and more career opportunities exist for women in technology and science.

Looking beyond the overall percentages in education, women have done quite well during the last decade within specific school districts. For example, Mertz and McNeely (1988) found that women held a larger percentage of principalships in larger city districts. Those issues including attitudes regarding traditional male networking, mentors and mobility are important because perception often becomes reality. Greyvenstein and Van Der Westhuizen (1991) suggest three major components be incorporated in administration programs designed to facilitate necessary changes at societal, institutional and individual levels. First, facilitate changes peripheral in nature for women. Second, promote advancement of women into education administration, and third, equip women with the essential expertise required by educational management (9-11).

The nature of peripheral forces upon women is vague and difficult to address because many women who received school administrative positions within the past few years report that they did not experience sex discrimination in their careers nor do they report any covert outside forces. Andrews and Bascom (1990) indicate that women in administrative roles appear more dominant than males in their school's internal power system. Most women, however, feel discomfort with power (Woo, 1985). Women also tend to experience some differential treatment when compared to men in the same position (Schmuck and Schubert, 1986). For example, Napier

and Willower (1991) explored the relationships between women and Malesand discovered that 92 percent of the women were often mistaken for secretaries, or spouses of male principals. Since leadership theories and practices exist in most preparation programs, students hold and practice many of the same beliefs and leadership styles, gender stereotypes exist even though males and females practice the same leadership characteristics( Heilman, Block, Mantell and Simon (1989) . The perceptions of faculty towards the effectiveness of the principal differ according to gender. The female principal is evaluated differently by males - usually more negative, than by females - usually more positive (Cioci and Madalyn, 1991; Brown and Burt, 1990).

Other studies during the past ten years indicate that women are more democratic than males, are more visible in the classroom, and they encourage more social interaction among faculty (Maeroff, 1988, Porat, 1985; Farth, 1984; Pinter, 1981). On the other hand, the perceptions of faculty towards the effectiveness of the principal differ according to gender. The female principal is evaluated differently by males - usually more negative, than by females who are usually more positive (Cioci, 1991; Brown and Burt, 1990). The third component suggested by Greyvenstein and Van Der Westhuizen (1991) addresses the expertise required by educational management. If we exclude leadership theories, effective characteristics of principals showing participatory management, sensitivity, and knowledge of curricula, then it appears that we should concentrate on changing the attitudes of women that would ordinarily exclude them from higher positions. The advancement of females into educational administration appears to be one of lip service. Although equal opportunity for women is standard practice, male superintendents and principals outnumber females. Males continue to dominate most school boards. Since most school boards are elected, this indicates that the general public appears more confident with males in decision making roles. Women are encouraged to apply for job vacancies, but when they are hired, they

tend to become highly educated directors of workshops or are the pink collar sector of the staff. (Reagan, 1991; Burns, 1992).

Mentoring and learning to network like the "good old boys" are important skills for women to acquire. Research indicates that women in administrative positions are more likely to acknowledge the importance of support from superordinates (Yeakey, Johnston, and Adkinson, 1986). Networking is important if women are to gain meaningful leadership experiences (Macaul and Dunlap,1988; Mertz, Welch & Henderson, 1987).

**PRESENT STUDY**

Sixty-one female students currently enrolled in administrative programs in both the public and private education sectors in Northwest Georgia were surveyed for an initial study to determine their demographic characteristics and attitudes. Twenty -eight questions include demographic information as well as beliefs and attitudes of students regarding administrative possibilities. One open-ended question asked for skills the students' believed they needed to succeed in a predominantly male environment. A second question asked for additional characteristics students need or want to know about women administrators. Results of this study will determine the specific types of information (as is supported by current research) female students perceive necessary as they prepare to enter their administrative career ladder

**RESULTS OF STUDY**

The results of this study are reported as nominal statistics. Percentages are reported in selected variables. An analysis of variance (ANOVA ) run on the variables shows no real significance at the .05 level between or among the 28 variables. However, there is a high

Table 1

**DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILES OF SAMPLES**

**Current Teaching Level**

| | Percentage |
|---|---|
| 1 Elementary | 33 |
| 2 Middle School | 23 |
| 3 High school | 39 |

**Age**

| Years | Percentage |
|---|---|
| 1 5-35 | 16 |
| 2 36-45 | 62 |
| 3 46-55 | 20 |
| 4 56+ | 1 |

**Ethnic**

| | Percentage |
|---|---|
| 1 Black | 20 |
| 2 Hispanic | 1 |
| 3 White | 77 |

Teaching levels, age and ethic background (see table 1) indicate that the majority of female students enrolled in the administrative programs are currently elementary teachers between the ages of 36-45, and they are predominantly white. Sixty-seven percent of the black teachers teach at the elementary level: 25 percent teach high school. White females show more diversity: 50 percent teach at the elementary level, 27 percent teach middle school, and 19 percent teach high school. The number of black female students in this sample are small, but they may indicate that more black females need to be recruited at higher teaching levels.

Table 2

**Predominate Area of Childhood**

| Area | Percentage |
|---|---|
| 1 Rural | 45 |
| 2 Urban | 16 |
| 3 Suburban | 39 |

As indicated by the survey questionnaire, only 16 percent of the total student population came from an urban setting, however, 50 percent of the black students and 6 percent of the white students identify this area as their primary background (see Table 2). These responses are not unusual when we study the nations' population for living preferences, but it is interesting that these students (55%)believe that their best chance for promotion to an administrative position will most likely be a suburban setting (see Table 3). Students (27%) believe that the rural area is their next best chance for promotion, followed by (18%) urban setting. Elementary teachers appear to be the only population that lists rural as well as suburban area for advancement. These beliefs contradict the research of Mertz and McNeely (1988) who discovered that women hold more principalships in larger school districts while women are less evident in suburban and rural areas (p. 14). This further indicates that in depth studies on each setting in specific geographical areas may be needed to show possible status and perceived opportunities of women administrators. This would meliorate women in making wise choices in career advancement.

Table 3

**Best Area for Chance of Promotion**

| Area | Percentage |
|---|---|
| 1 Rural | 27 |
| 2 Urban | 18 |
| 3 Suburban | 55 |

One barrier that women encounter when applying for career advancement is the preference for male administrators especially if a school board deems it necessary for the school to have strong leadership. According to Gotwalt and Towns (1989); Marshall and Mitchell (1989), women administrative positions are down 5 percent since 1982. It appears the glass ceiling exists in educational administration. Research on both women's and men's perceptions of hiring need to be updated, however, Martin and Grant (1987) found that 55 percent of the women interviewed believed that preferential hiring practices kept them from receiving a promotion. This percentage is lower than the students' perception of favoritism. This study found students believe that males are favored 81% to 3% females. Only 16 percent of the respondents felt that preference is neutral (see Table 4). Those students teaching high school believe that percentage is as high as 91 percent. This interpretation may be due to the extremely high percentages (98%) of male high school principals When students responded to their preference of leader gender, males were favored 17 percent over 14 percent females. Sixty-nine percent of the students remain neutral in their preference. High school teachers were the only group to prefer a woman administrator (see Table 5). Sixty-nine percent of the respondents believe that it is difficult for women in administration to advance beyond a certain level, yet students (31%) believe advancement is faster than in private industry. Fifty-three percent felt that advancement was slower than private industry.

**Table 4**

**Favored Gender for Principalships As Perceived by Female Students**

| Gender | Percentage |
|---|---|
| Males | 81 |
| Female | 3 |
| Neutral | 16 |

**Table 5**

**Students' Preference of Leader Gender**

| Gender | Percentage |
|---|---|
| Male | 17 |
| Female | 14 |
| No preference | 69 |

Although there are several leadership styles, female administration students indicate a preference for democratic and situational leadership. Four students had no response which may indicate they need more information about leadership theory, or they are not sure of their styles. These findings support research on the current trend of empowering faculty that relies on a democratic or participatory style and is more effective than autocratic control (Eagly and Johnson, 1990) (see Table 6).

**Table 6**

**Students' Perceived Leadership Style**

| Style | Percentage |
|---|---|
| 0 No response | 7 |
| 1 Democratic | 39 |
| 3 Transformational | 7 |
| 4 Transactional | 1 |
| 5 Situational | 43 |
| 7 Other | 2 |

Mentoring is common in the business world. In education, mentoring usually pertains to beginning teachers or other programs designed to assist children in reading or self-esteem. The number of women in administration who have or who understand the concept of mentoring is surprisingly low. Twenty-eight respondents indicate they have a mentor. Analyzing each variable by ethnic background and geographical regions indicates that women who have mentors tend to choose their own and, they choose males as mentors. Black women, and women from the Midwest tend to use mentoring as part of their networking. Most students coming from rural areas indicate that they have no need of a mentor. (see Table 7).

Table 7

| Mentor/ Gender | |
|---|---|
| **Mentor** | **Percentage** |
| Yes | 48 |
| No | 52 |
| **Gender** | **Percentage** |
| Male | 54 |
| Female | 46 |

An area not covered in current literature is the mobility of female administrators. Over half of the students (57%) expressed a willingness to move for career advancement. The distance reported, however, amounts of a lack of mobility. Thirty-six percent of the respondents will not go more than 50 miles, 5 percent will move more than 100 miles and 10 percent are willing to move out of state, if necessary. White females are willing to travel longer distances as are women who report living in the Midwest and coming from urban areas. It appears that mobility needs to be addressed and could be a part of the Greyvenstein and Van Der Westhuizen program of attitude and change for women administrators (see Table 8).

Table 8

| **Mobility** | **Percentage** |
|---|---|
| Yes | 57 |
| No | 43 |
| **Miles Willing to Move** | **Percentage** |
| Not Sure | 34 |
| Less than 50 | 2 |
| 50 - 100 | 15 |
| More than 100 | 5 |
| Out of state | 10 |

Finally, the effect of the glass ceiling in educational administration. Sixty percent of the respondents believed that it is difficult for women in administration to advance beyond a certain level. When asked whether or not advancement was faster or slower than private industry, 31 percent of the students believed that advancement is faster and 53 percent of the women believed that advancement is slower than private industry.

Responses to the open-ended questions reveal that respondents want to learn skills that include networking, better communication, business management, public relations and an awareness of expectations. The characteristics students believe women administrators already posses include a knowledge of political roles, current research , ability to handle conflicts at home and in the work place, visibility, and organization.

**Implications**

This study on female students in administrative programs will serve as a benchmark for further study and understanding students' perceptions will add meaning to courses taught. More research on women's perspectives from other geographical areas is needed for comparisons. In addition, male students should be included in the study to determine what differences, if any, are significant. Women who hold educational administrative positions should be surveyed to study the paths they took and their beliefs about glass ceilings in educational administration. Through a comparison between current administrators and students we may be able to predict the success of our students who wish to enter leadership roles .

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